

# The Empath and the Psychopath: Ethics, Imagination, and Intercorporeality in Bryan Fuller's *Hannibal*

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## Abstract:

The long-form television drama series *Hannibal* (Fuller 2013–2015) thematises the embodied imagination and the elicitation of empathy and ethical understanding at the level of narrative and characterisation as well as through character engagement and screen aesthetics. Using *Hannibal* as a case study, this research investigates how stylistic choices frame the experiences of screen characters and engender forms of intersubjectivity based on corporeal and cognitive routes to empathy; in particular, it examines the capacity for screen media to facilitate what neuroscientist Vittorio Gallese terms intercorporeality. As a constitutive aspect of intersubjectivity and social understanding that works through embodied simulation, intercorporeality invites a reconceptualisation of empathy and its association with ethical motivation and insight. *Hannibal* also introduces cannibalism as a dark metaphor for the incorporation of another into oneself, reflecting on empathy's ill-understood potential for negative affect and unethical consequences.

**Keywords:** Aesthetics; Affect; Embodied Imagination; Emotion; Empathy; Ethics; Intercorporeality.

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## *The Empath and the Psychopath: Fuller's Hannibal*

"What he has is pure empathy. He can assume your point of view, or mine—and maybe some other points of view that scare him. It's an uncomfortable gift, Jack. Perception's a tool that's pointed on both ends."

—Hannibal Lecter discussing Will Graham in  
*Hannibal* (S1E1) "Apéritif"

As philosopher Jeanette Kennett observes, there is much to "learn about empathy and in particular about its role in morality by studying conditions in which it is significantly impaired" (2017, p. 364). A lack of empathy is symptomatic of autism and psychopathy—conditions attributed to a number of characters in showrunner Bryan Fuller's television series *Hannibal* (NBC, 2013–2015). *Hannibal* tells the story of psychopathic psychiatrist Hannibal Lecter's (Mads Mikkelsen) cannibalistic exploits during the time that he befriends and counsels Will Graham (Hugh Dancy), a special investigator for the FBI with an "empathy disorder" that enables him to profile serial killers. The series is based on characters from Thomas Harris's novel, *Red Dragon* (1981), which takes place before *The Silence of the Lambs* (novel by Thomas Harris 1988; film by Jonathan Demme 1991).<sup>1</sup> The TV series attributes Graham's augmented capacity for empathy to several factors including a surfeit of mirror neurons, a vivid imagination, and a psychological disorder that includes symptoms of Asperger's syndrome, such as avoiding eye contact and experiencing awkwardness with social interaction, although autism-spectrum disorders usually inhibit empathy. In *Hannibal*'s exaggerated representations of the multiple valences of empathic states and in its dramatization of empathic processes, the television series helps us understand more clearly how the complex phenomena of empathy and ethical insight may be elicited.

The analysis that follows is guided by two central questions. First, how do cognitive and corporeal modes of empathic engagement relate to ideas about the embodied imagination,<sup>2</sup> interaffectivity, and intercorporeality?

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1. The characters in Fuller's *Hannibal* also feature in two other films based on *Red Dragon*: *Manhunter* (Michael Mann, 1986) and *Red Dragon* (Brett Ratner, 2002). Anthony Hopkins also plays the eponymous character in director Ridley Scott's *Hannibal* (2001).
  2. The term "embodied imagination" is borrowed from phenomenological film theorist Vivian Sobchack's essay "Is Any Body Home? Embodied Imagination and Visible Evictions" (2004). Sobchack uses the term as a synonym for the bodily imagination, which she describes in ways related to proprioception and the "subjective, lived feeling of our material being" (2004, p.192). My use of the term here encompasses the subjective feeling of one's own embodied knowledge but extends to the bodily

Second, what roles might ethical evaluation and televisual narration play in these interconnected processes of empathising, feeling, and imagining? As detailed below, I approach empathy as a way of feeling into another's subjectivity in what phenomenologist Dan Zahavi refers to as a form of "knowledge by acquaintance" that produces experiential understanding of another person's "embodied mind" (2014, p. 151).

***Einführung: Ethical Understanding and the Intelligence of Emotions***

Empathy plays a central role in the ways in which people engage with narrative and visual arts and develop an understanding of the interiority and emotions of others, hence it has special importance in both the study of ethics and the study of film and television. While empathy is not an emotion in its own right, it is closely associated with the role of emotion as an index of value and with what philosopher Martha Nussbaum terms "the intelligence of emotions," which forms "part and parcel of the system of ethical reasoning" (2001, p. 1). I discuss both the positive and negative potential of empathy and its complicated relationship to emotion and morality in what follows; however, empathy and emotion are considered by many to be connected to what moral philosopher Heidi Maibom identifies as the prosocial, altruistic aspects of ethical judgment and motivation (2014, pp. 28–38). In cinema studies, philosopher Robert Sinnerbrink has advanced an appreciation of "cinempathy" to consider film as a medium of ethical experience, describing the "dynamic movement between the poles of empathy and sympathy as a cinempathy: a cinematic/kinetic expression of the synergy between affective attunement, emotional engagement and moral evaluation that captures more fully the ethical potential of the cinematic experience" (2016, p. 80). Scholarly attention has only recently begun to focus on empathy and emotion in television studies, yet despite the awkward fit of the neologism, Sinnerbrink's concept of cinempathy can be extended to apply to television. In *Emotions and Contemporary TV Series*, Alejandro Martinez and Ana Gonzalez point out that "the fact that emotions unveil our values as well as our position in the larger social structure makes them an important source of self-knowledge and also knowledge about the world" (2016, p. 13). Martinez and Gonzalez go on to suggest that long-form television drama fosters what they call "embodied judgments" and that "these types of narratives inspire emotion and reflection" (2016, p. 13). I aim to demonstrate that television narratives such as *Hannibal* do more than inspire emotion, they facilitate both affective and cognitive

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imagining of and other-oriented responses to how others feel, which is more closely associated with intercorporeality than interoception or proprioception.

modes of empathy and invite reflection on empathy's mechanisms and its ethical effects.

The history of the term empathy is well documented as originating in German aesthetics where the concept of *Einfühlung* was introduced by art historian Robert Vischer in 1873 before being adopted by psychologist Theodor Lipps (1903) and translated into English as “empathy” by Edward Titchener in 1909. Thereafter empathy was taken up in the hermeneutic and phenomenological traditions to refer to projecting oneself into or “feeling into” artworks or other people's subjective experience in a manner that produces experiential understanding. Zahavi's phenomenological account provides a useful point of entry for thinking about empathy in relation to film and television. He argues that empathy is a form of “expressive understanding” of the embodied mind of another person that “allows for a distinct experiential grasp of and access to the other's psychological life” (Zahavi, 2017, p. 42). While there is much debate about how narrowly to define empathy, most scholars agree that it encompasses both involuntary neurophysiological responses (affective empathy or embodied simulation) and volitional acts of cognition (perspective taking, mind-reading, or mentalising). Zahavi's working definition therefore captures important aspects of empathic responses to screen media including cognitive processes such as imagination as well as feelings that may be shared with screen characters.

In “Empathy, Mind and Morals,” Alvin Goldman contends that empathy is important both to philosophy of mind and moral theory due to its capacity to offer insight into the mental and emotional states of others, to facilitate mutual understanding of motives and emotions, to enhance the ability to predict behaviour, and thus to “promote mutual aid and inhibit injurious behaviour” (1992, p. 35). Psychologist Martin Hoffman's influential work on empathy and moral development examines the contribution of empathy to altruism, compassion, concern for others, moral judgment, caring, and justice in terms of empathy's prosocial functions (2000; see also Hamington, 2015). The analysis of *Hannibal* to follow in no way undermines this important work in moral philosophy and moral psychology, but it does demonstrate the capacity of complex, long-form narratives to reveal the intricacies and contradictions that may inflect the way empathy functions in artworks and in human interactions and challenging ethical scenarios.

### **Narrative and Aesthetic Evocations of Empathy**

Building on the foundations of research in moral psychology and philosophy, humanities scholars find that perceptual processes and reactions to aesthetic qualities and cues are also central to eliciting

empathy in the narrative arts because the experience of empathy in literature or film recruits the emotive, imaginative, and interpretive abilities we use when attuning ourselves to others in relational ethical deliberation (see John, 2017, p. 315). According to literary theorist Suzanne Keen, narrative empathy involves perspective-taking and vicariously sharing feelings that can be evoked by seeing, hearing about, reading about, or imagining another person's story and their inner state (2007, p. 4). From the perspective of film studies, Alastair Fox argues any response to a work of fictive representation involves an "intersubjective transaction" that includes sharing attention, intentions, and emotions (Fox, 2016, p. 163). In narrative fiction, the reader or audience's attention is focused and shared through "the selection and arrangement of plot elements and in strategies of enunciation such as narrative perspective, framing, control of distance, and timing" (Fox, 2016, p. 163). Intentions are shared through alternations in audio-visual point of view and shifts in focalisation that characterise narratives and are often signaled by voice-over narration, flashbacks or other subjective coding in film and television sequences (Fox, 2016, p. 164). Fox goes on to claim that sharing affective states is facilitated by "conceptual metaphor, the arrangement of montage elements, the construction of plot shape, and the use of tone, especially as these inhere to the intrinsic affective structures of genres"—and these elements work together to foster "interaffectivity" (2016, p. 164). In these ways screen media narratives provide access to both cognitive-imaginative and affective-experiential forms of empathy because audiences are able to perceptually share in the sights and sounds of protagonists' internal and external worlds and to mirror characters' emotional facial expressions and gestures. Whereas other forms of narrative fiction such as literature may primarily facilitate cognitive empathy, film and television also elicit what I will term "affective transfer." Without getting entangled in neuroscientific terminology from the literature on empathy's relationship to theory of mind or mirror neurons and embodied simulation, affective transfer points to the ways in which stylistic techniques may facilitate corporeal empathy by directing the audience's attention to screen characters' affective experience.

Narrative, with its cause and effect logic, is fundamental to organising human understanding of selfhood, behaviour, and events (Ricoeur, 1991). In screen narratives more specifically, the codes and conventions of continuity editing and the grammar of cinematography also inform the way we think and these techniques and conventions are at the same time structured by the way humans perceive, experience and understand the world. The shot-reverse-shot structure and the technique of pulling focus, where the audience may take the position of first the listener, and

then the speaker in a conversation are examples of this. In *Emotions in Contemporary TV Series*, Alberto Garcia argues TV offers a type of narrative distinguished by its “textual duration” and “a stronger familiarity with the characters, which in turn influences the degree of sympathy that spectators feel towards them; this can even affect the moral judgments placed upon their actions” (2016, p. 7). In the same collection of essays, Robin Nelson claims that affect is a “structuring principle” in long-form serial television watching, which involves “a process of dynamic interplay between feeling and cognition mobilized by textual complexity” (2016, p. 30). From these conventional techniques of narrative television through to the abstract and subjective imagery in the third season of *Hannibal*, the television series attunes its audience to perspective sharing and empathic experience.

Describing empathy as a complex moral ability closely linked to both imagination and compassion, Nussbaum argues that the narrative arts play a significant role in fostering ethical capabilities:

Narrative imagination is an essential preparation for moral interaction. Habits of empathy and conjecture conduce to a certain type of citizenship and a certain form of community: one that cultivates a sympathetic responsiveness to another's needs, and understands the way circumstances shape those needs. (2008, p.148–9)

Imagination, as Nussbaum uses the term here, is a form of ethical attunement or attention to others' stories and inner states. *Hannibal* is a series that takes imagination, its connection to empathy and social cognition, and its ethical consequences seriously. This is most evident in the character of Will Graham, empath and criminal profiler, but the capacity for empathy is also central to the television audience's experience of narrative imagination and responsiveness. Here again, imagination and empathy may have both positive and negative ethical considerations as concerns about the audience being “seduced” by Lecter's sharp intellect and cultured antihero status suggest (see Bainbridge, 2015).

### **From Imaginative Insight to Incorporation: Cognitive Empathy and Affective Transfer**

When FBI Chief Jack Crawford (Laurence Fishburne) asks Graham in the pilot episode if he “can empathise with narcissists and sociopaths,” Graham replies, “I can empathise with anybody. It's less to do with a personality disorder than an act of imagination.” Crawford later tells Graham, “I want to use your imagination,” although he recognises that Graham deals with “huge amounts of fear” that “comes with

his imagination.” This recognises that emotion and imagination are inextricably linked and work together during empathy. Graham himself describes empathy as an act of imagination, which is represented televisually as reconstructing crimes in first person point of view, in reverse. But it is an embodied, affective form of imagining that requires immersion and emplacement and that has a powerful physical effect on Graham, leaving him sweating and gasping, pierced by headaches, shaking, and beset by nightmares. Empathy is also represented in the series as a form of extra-sensory perception or insight, a form of mind reading – Graham removes his glasses when he empathises in order to see past the lenses and barriers that separate self from other.

The affective force of the embodied imagination is also vividly represented in the series when, for example, Graham realises that the serial killer he is profiling is eating his victims. He takes this knowledge in through his own body as though he, too, has ingested human flesh and his feeling of horrified disgust becomes palpable to and may be mirrored by the audience. Disgust, as Angela Ndalians argues with reference to Lecter’s cannibalism, is a corporeal form of insight that “invades the body” (2015, p. 282) and “disgust-arousing art also relies on a response of intense viscosity that is somatically ‘grounded’” (2015, p. 283). Much research into the fear of invasion associated with disgust emphasises how disgust evolved to guard against the ingestion of contaminants to ensure that the body isn’t polluted. See, for example, Carl Plantinga’s work on the relationship between physical disgust and sociomoral disgust (2006) and Julian Hanich’s account of the aesthetics of disgust (2009). While cannibalism provokes disgust in Graham – a “sociomoral” reaction that is meant to be shared by the audience – the television series simultaneously problematises empathy and forms of identification or “fusion” that are overly visceral and proximal by thematically linking empathy to incorporation and thus to cannibalism. As structural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss provocatively states in his essay “We Are All Cannibals,” “Jean-Jacques Rousseau saw the origin of social life in the sentiment that impels us to identify with others. And after all, the most simple means to identify others with oneself is to eat them” (2016, p. 88). Through this complex aesthetic and narrative evocation of disgust and the theme of cannibalistic incorporation, the television series explicitly invites its audience and its characters to consider themselves and their own bodily relationships to empathic feelings, sensory perception, and imagination. In doing so *Hannibal* also problematises the loss of clear boundaries between self and other that empathy is sometimes thought to entail.

The aesthetic techniques used in the TV series indicate salient features of the experience of empathy itself. In the opening sequence of the pilot episode, the experience of empathy is communicated via a slow zoom into Graham's face and a pendulum swinging back and forth, suggesting a hypnotic state as it audibly swooshes through the air with the rhythm of a heartbeat or pulse and the optical impression of eyes blinking closed. The heartbeat and pulse suggest inner sight and the sepia filter and *zshoomp* sound indicates a movement back in time. These close, augmented sensory connections are integral to empathy and the embodied insight that it brings, suggesting that it is not just a cognitive appraisal based on the evidence at hand. Empathy offers a different, experiential way of knowing. Shallow focus is used in conjunction with close ups to isolate the human face from the background and lock attention onto it, augmenting the sense that Graham has a unique ability to connect almost completely with others and yet he is alone in and separate from the world.

By foregrounding the role of imagination in constructing and inhabiting another person's reality, the series positions cognitive empathy as crucial to Graham's professional and personal life, yet it also suggests that acute empathy results in a painful emotional overload that may impede social engagement. Neurocinematic research points to the ways in which aesthetic choices and screen technologies function to construct the experiences of television characters and invite the audience to inhabit the subjective realms of screen characters. *Hannibal* exemplifies how television's long-running character arcs afford the opportunity to establish intersubjective insight and foster perceptual attunement, yet the use of cannibalism as a trope for the empathic incorporation of another into oneself also exposes empathy's negative potential and perceived dangers of screen media spectatorship.

### **Mirror Neurons and Intercorporeality**

The aesthetic cues and televisual techniques in *Hannibal* foster what neuroscientist Vittorio Gallese terms "intercorporeality," which is a form of embodied simulation facilitated by mirror neurons (2014). In Gallese's view, intercorporeality is a constitutive aspect of intersubjectivity that is central to social understanding because it offers a primary source of pre-reflective knowledge of other people's behaviour, goals, and inner states by direct simulation of that person's own affective, bodily experience. Near the end of the first season (episode 10, "Buffet Froid") Lecter informs Crawford: "The problem Will has is too many mirror neurons. Our heads are filled with them when we are children. They're supposed to help us socialise and then melt away, but Will held



onto his, which makes knowing who he is a challenge.” In this same episode, Crawford tells Graham: “What you do is you take all of the evidence available at a crime scene. You extrapolate. You reconstruct the thinking of a killer. You don’t think of yourself as the killer.” Graham, who is at the time suffering undiagnosed anti-NMDA receptor encephalitis, replies: “I got lost in the reconstruction,” implying that in the experience of empathy he may in fact “get lost” in the identity, emotions, motives, and mental processes of the killer he is profiling.

Gallese is one of the scientists credited with the discovery of mirror neurons and the study of their activation in film spectatorship and he has shown that mirror neurons are active when we perform, perceive, or imagine goal-directed action (2014; 2016). Thus, mirror neurons and the affective mimicry they produce can be understood as a form of embodied imagination – an intercorporeal engagement with another subject rather than a loss of self. The mirror neuron mechanism has been referred to as the biological underpinning of empathy because it provides a kind of direct embodied knowledge of other people’s actions and objectives. Fellow neuroscientist Marco Iacoboni goes so far as to claim that neural mirroring facilitates social and altruistic conduct by making intersubjectivity possible (2009, p. 666).

Acoustic and visual close-ups are two powerful ways that film and television can activate mirroring responses, facilitate intersubjectivity, and elicit visceral, somatic responses in the audience. Although the term empathy is not used explicitly, as early as 1924 when he published *Visible Man*, Béla Balázs championed the expressive potential of the body and particularly close-ups of the face in cinema. Balázs claimed that when confronted by the physiognomy of the human face magnified in close up on screen, “we see emotions and thoughts” (2010, p. 100): in observing gestures and facial expressions the human subject’s feelings and intentions not only become visible but also palpable. With the advent of synchronized sound, Balázs developed his embodied, sensory approach to film by identifying acoustic close-ups in which “subtle associations and interrelations of thoughts and emotions can be conveyed by means of very low, soft sound effects” (1952, pp. 210–211) as an emotive technique unique to cinema—unavailable to literary works or stage performances. Balázs introduced ideas about the empathic qualities of close-up cinematography and sound design that have had a lasting influence on phenomenological film theory and cognitivist studies of facial feedback.

In *Hannibal*, we find evidence of Gallese’s concept of intercorporeality and Balázs’s ideas at work not only in expressive facial close-ups but in extreme close-ups of body cavities such as an opera singer’s epiglottis and

mouth and Lecter's ears and nose, which create a connection to the television viewer's own body and sensory perception. For example, in the opera scene in season 1 episode 7 "Sorbet" the camera emerges from deep within the windpipe of the diva's throat, moving through the vibrations of her moist, pink flesh as she sings. Amidst breathy, bodily sucking sounds that underscore the aria, the camera withdraws, moving out of her open mouth with the beautiful music to reveal her face and body; it then roves through the audience to find Lecter before rotating inward through his ear as he appreciates the music, moving into the darkness of his mind. Top light obscures access to the expression in Lecter's eyes in this scene, as it does in much of the series, but the soundscape draws the audience deep into the characters' inner worlds. In many scenes, the soundscape of the series is awash with disturbing undercurrents of metallic and mechanical sounds mixed with organic, bodily noises like a throbbing pulse, a drumming heartbeat, and buzzing, pounding, headache sounds. A bull roarer is used to create the guttural sound of the man-stag beast that stalks Graham in his dreams and hallucinations and the cinematographer attempts to give the audience a visceral sense of Graham's instability by attaching a Claremont image shaker to the camera lens to lend a corporeal vibration to the image. These aesthetic techniques foreground the materiality and subjectivity of the screen characters' experiences and create a kind of affective transfer for the audience. Writing about the significance of sound in the elicitation of cinematic empathy, Mark Ward contends that: "cinema recruits our body's innate capacity for 'feeling into' another's affective state, offering an embodied and noncognitive route to empathy, even if that other is fictional... cinematic sound design is an embodied process of experiential knowing" (2015, pp. 185–186).

Balázs's theory of imaginative engagement with the aesthetic representations of the face suggests that acting and other aspects of cinematic or televisual style including cinematography and sound provide insight into human subjectivity by revealing the emotions of characters and effacing the boundaries separating the self from others. Subsequently, researchers have built on Balázs's work to further understanding of how screen aesthetics elicit empathy by cultivating emotional perception and social understanding. For example, Plantinga analyses "scenes of empathy," which are narrative sequences that show the audience close-ups of a film character's face to reveal "interior emotional experience," ensuring that the character's emotional life "becomes the locus of attention" (1999, p. 239). In scenes of empathy, the character's perceptual experience is typically privileged through a shot-reverse-shot sequence that reveals what the character is looking at, followed by close-up reaction shots that show their response. Human physiognomy is

hard-wired into perception so that it looms large on our attentional register (Davidson, 2012, p. 9), which is why intimate close-ups of Lecter and Graham throughout the television series draw viewers in so effectively.

### Empathy's Negative Potential

Despite its capacity to facilitate ethical insight or altruistic behaviour, there are several distinct ways in which empathy may also have troubling effects. These include the potentially negative consequences of empathising with flawed or dangerous characters, using empathic insight to do harm, or having an aversive reaction to the vicarious experience of others' pain.

Screen media, and particularly film or television narratives that have a strong visceral charge and that invite a degree of identification with violent, sadistic, or evil characters, often give rise to concerns about emotional contagion, imitation, and an erosion of the distinction between self and other dating back to early understandings of empathy. Lipps, whose concept of empathy encompassed aesthetic appreciation and the problem of other minds, claimed that to feel *Einfühlung* is to be "transported" into another subject, object, or artwork and in the process to experience a sense of interconnection so that "the distinction between the self and the object disappears" (Lipps, 1903, p. 253). This concern about empathic "fusion" remains contentious in contemporary debates about empathy's meaning and its relationship to film spectatorship, intersubjectivity, and ethics.

As the analysis of *Hannibal* has demonstrated, the aesthetic design of film and television texts can intensify empathy and the narrative arts play an important cultural role by extending the range of people and experiences that an individual may have occasion to empathise with, as cognitive film theorist Murray Smith points out (see Smith, 1995; 2011). However, empathy is not necessarily linked to prosocial behaviour. Ed Tan, like many cognitive film scholars and affective neuroscientists, argues that there is an evolutionary advantage to understanding and predicting other people's feelings and actions and that faces and eyes receive most attention by audiences and in everyday social interaction (2013, p. 347). This finely attuned perception is what makes Lecter a successful higher order predator and Graham an adept criminal profiler.

When profiling killers, Graham experiences dissociative episodes and his empathy disorder overwhelms him to the extent that Lecter says: "I'm worried about you, Will. You empathise so completely with the killers Jack Crawford has your mind wrapped around that you lose yourself to them." This loss of the self or loss of boundaries around the self is a

concern often expressed about empathy and about film and television. For instance, Tan suggests that, as audience members, we often involuntarily “lose ourselves” in screen characters (2013, pp. 337–8) when identifying strongly with a protagonist and mirroring their emotional state. In a more extreme formulation of the “fusion of subjectivities” claim, Adriano D’Aloia states: “the total assimilation of subjectivities stems from viewers losing self-awareness and fusing their egos with that of the character” (2015, p. 189). Even in a fictional case like Graham’s empathy disorder, it is not possible for empathic experience to bring about “total assimilation of subjectivities” or a “fusion of selves” (Raz and Hendler, 2014, p. 97) either in everyday life or in relation to film and television characters—and if it were possible, such merging would not constitute empathy. As Zahavi explains:

Rather than blurring the distinction between self and other, rather than leading to some sense of merged personal identities [...], the asymmetry between self-experience and other-experience is quite crucial for empathy. (2017, p. 39)

Joshua May’s work on intersubjectivity critically examines the extent to which empathic fusion or merging with another subject might occur. May debunks the fears and suppositions of those who overstate the empathic fusion hypothesis and egoists who argue that “empathy blurs the distinction between self and other such that one may in some sense be concerned with oneself” (2017, p. 472), citing numerous empirical studies that show “empathy typically leads to altruistic concern for others” (2017, p. 468). Philosophers such as Nussbaum who are sceptical about the extent to which empathic fusion is possible argue that empathy is more akin to “the mental preparation of a skilled (Method) actor: it involves a participatory enactment of the situation of the sufferer, but is always combined with the awareness that one is not oneself the sufferer” (2001, p. 327, qtd in May, 2017, p. 475). Ultimately, scholars like Zahavi, May, and Nussbaum offer persuasive accounts of empathy that allow for intersubjective insight into others’ perspectives and experiences in everyday life and in the narratives of film, television, or literature without entailing fusion with another subject by way of contagious thoughts or feelings that are taken up as one’s own.

Notwithstanding implausible fears about empathy’s sinister capacity to lead to a loss of self, the inability to “feel with” or “feel into” another person’s subjective experience is far more of a concern. Like Graham, Lecter is acutely perceptive, but he uses his insights in ways that are far from altruistic. Lecter says to Graham, “Observing is what we do. I can’t shut mine off any more than you can shut yours off.” Yet Lecter is

being disingenuous here, for he has an unusual capacity to shut off empathy.

Alison Denham observes in her study of empathy and moral motivation:

It is widely believed that psychopaths exhibit deficits in affective empathy; indeed, ‘lack of empathy’ is among the disorder’s diagnostic criteria. This is supported by behavioural observations as well as autonomic measures such as skin-conductance and startle-blink responses. (2017, p. 236)

A study led by neuroscientist Harma Meffert indicates psychopaths aren’t incapable of empathy – they just excel at blocking the amygdala’s capacity to inhibit aggressive behaviour by associating it with feelings of the victim’s pain and fear (Meffert et al., 2013, p. 2559). In other words, psychopaths can experience “cold empathy” or insight into other people’s experience without actually feeling for or caring about them. Uncoupling empathy from emotional alignment or feelings of ethical concern goes some way to explaining Hannibal’s chilling combination of cultured charm and callousness as psychopaths typically exhibit a “failure to integrate affective and cognitive information” (Denham, 2017, p. 237).

Tan’s perspective on how screen aesthetics can cue intentional empathy or “mind reading” approaches the idea of “cold empathy” when he maintains that “empathy does not always result in an emotion” and that empathy is “a cognitive state resulting from efforts to understand another person” (2013, p. 339, 340). Similarly, philosopher Amy Coplan denies that involuntary mirroring or affective resonance qualify as empathy and instead favours a cool, deliberate mode of empathy that is often described by cognitivists as involving higher order cognitive processes. Coplan argues that imagining oneself in another person’s situation results in self-oriented perspective taking, which she views as “pseudo-empathy”; by contrast, “empathy proper” involves other-oriented perspective taking that maintains distinct boundaries between self and other (2011, p. 58). In Coplan’s view, affective matching is one of empathy’s necessary conditions; however, neither involuntary emotional contagion nor self-oriented perspective taking are conducive to the ethical benefits of “empathy proper” because they are not other-directed and can lead to misapprehensions about interpersonal similarity or result in aversive reactions such as being overwhelmed by one’s own negative affect (2011, p. 57). By this definition, Graham’s first-person imagining of criminal subjectivity and his strong aversive reaction to that experience would be termed pseudo-empathy—self-oriented feelings denuded of ethical value. However, taking a different perspective from Coplan and revisiting

Martinez and Gonzalez's work on television and embodied judgments, one could argue that Graham's affective response is an embodied ethical judgment. In experiencing personal distress as a result of empathising with murderers, Graham not only gains imaginative insight into their actions and motives, he judges them to be morally abhorrent through a cognitive act of evaluation and also through a deeply felt, corporeal value judgment.

### **The Embodied Imagination: Social Cognition and Ethical Insight**

As Gallese argues, intercorporeality or embodied knowledge based on mirror mechanisms (what I have referred to as affective transfer) is a primary source of our knowledge of others and our capacity for empathic understanding (2014, p. 4). This view of intersubjectivity and identity is grounded in the concept of the embodied self. Gallese claims that the discovery of mirror neurons led to a reconceptualisation of intersubjectivity in terms of an intercorporeal form of social cognition based on "the mutual resonance of intentionally meaningful sensorimotor behaviours" (Gallese, 2016, p. 302). When he states that "intercorporeality becomes the primordial source of knowledge that we have of others," Gallese means that empathic understanding of others' agency and intentionality depends on a kind of social intelligence derived from observing bodily actions, gestures and expressions that resonate in our own body (Gallese, 2016, p. 302; see also Gallese, 2014, p. 7). Here Gallese shows that empathy cannot be reduced to a physiological level or to an act of cognition. Rather, as D'Aloia contends, "it is a feeling composed of different levels, namely perceptual, emotive and cognitive, grounded in the lived-body" (D'Aloia, 2012, p. 101). This reinforces claims that intercorporeality and interaffectivity are foundational components of empathy:

Primary empathy as mediated by embodied interaction may subsequently be extended by higher-level cognitive capacities such as perspective-taking and imaginary transposition. Nevertheless, intercorporeality and interaffectivity remain the basis of social cognition. (Fuchs, 2016, p. 196)

Film and television texts, especially those that are aesthetically and emotively rich, are designed to make audiences watch closely and become attuned to the expressive faces and forms on screen, thus screen media and spectatorship are as valuable as any laboratory or medical imaging device in studying the experience of empathy. Indeed, Patricia Pisters' astute analysis of another television serial killer, *Dexter*, shows that contemporary neuroscience emphasises "the significant role of

embodiment in any kind of processes of the brain,” therefore, “the classic division between mind/cognition versus body/phenomenological experience” now needs to be “rethought in new and perhaps more productive ways” (2014, pp. 58–59). Film and television can play a role in engendering empathy and intersubjective understanding because as viewers tune in to their subjective responses and observe the expressive performances on screen, the screen engages the embodied imagination by focusing attention on information that the body and the senses communicate about oneself and other people. Joel Krueger claims that because facial expressions, posture and gestures often reveal aspects of a person’s mental and emotional state, it follows that ethical sensitivity can be developed “by paying careful attention to and responding to the bodily dynamics that underwrite our lived encounters with other people. Heightened perceptual attunement breeds deeper forms of responsive empathy” (2009, p. 691). Thus, the role of the body and particularly the face in displaying and mimicking emotions and facial expressions, postures, and gestures makes subjective states available to others in ways that may activate the altruistic potential of empathy and its moral dimensions.

This analysis of *Hannibal* has furthered the argument that film and television have an important place in the narrative arts because the aesthetic and technical audio-visual strategies by which screen media represent experience can also reproduce a protagonist’s perceptual experience, stimulating both the imaginative and the affective components of empathy. The characterisation and aesthetic techniques of *Hannibal* illuminate different modes and understandings of empathy as well as enabling us to work through fears and concerns about the potential for both empathy and film and television to overwhelm a person by infecting them with a contagious form of subjectivity, as expressed in metaphors of fusion, incorporation, and cannibalism. I hope to have shown that intercorporeality is not a dangerous loss of self or an unethical act, but an integral component of empathy that normally facilitates social insight and interaction and that is fostered by screen media. *Hannibal* illustrates the significance of audio-visual media and their capacity to engage viewers with characters’ subjective experiences through the use of close-ups, performance techniques, cinematography, sound design, and sustained character identification over many hours of screen time and narrative immersion. The television series *Hannibal* affords an understanding of the importance of screen aesthetics and empathy’s positive and negative valences, while opening up understandings of what intercorporeality and the embodied imagination might entail.



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